MINORITY REPORT.

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My old comrade David Dellinger, hero of the anti-imperialist movement, telephoned the other day to tell me of the fast he was undertaking to protest the celebration of racism, conquest and plunder that impended on Columbus Day. I am as respectful of my elders as any ancestor-worshiping Iroquois, and David has been to prison for his beliefs more times than I have had hot dinners, but a hot dinner—with steak *frites*, cheese and salad and a decent half bot. of something, all complete—was what I urged him to go and have. Break your fast, old thing, I beseeched; 1492 was a very good year.

I can never quite decide whether the anti-Columbus movement is merely risible or faintly sinister. It is risible in the same way that all movements of conservative anachronism are risible, and reminds me of Evelyn Waugh's complaint that he could never find a politician who would promise to put the clock back. It is sinister, though, because it is an ignorant celebration of stasis and backwardness, with an unpleasant tinge of self-hatred.

Not long ago, another good man, Ted Solotaroff, sent me a book he had helped edit called *Black Hills/White Justice*, by Edward Lazarus. This details the long courtroom battle fought by various factions of the Sioux to reclaim their rights in the mountains of South Dakota. You can guess the story: treaties broken, lands filched, settlements put to the torch, women and children vilely abused. And all of it done by the Sioux to the Kiowa Indians, who had controlled the Black Hills before the Sioux got there in 1814. Actually, the book deals mainly with the greed and depredation of the palefaces, which is no doubt as it should be. But it is honest enough to say that the Sioux did drive off the Kiowa, and it quotes Chief Black Hawk saying candidly, "These lands once belonged to the Kiowas and the Crows, but we whipped these nations out of them, and in this we did what the white men do when they want the lands of the Indians."

This is only a micro-illustration of the absurdity of founding a claim of right or justice on the idea of the indigenous. The Arawaks who were done in by Columbus's sailors, the Inca, the Comanche and the rest were not the *original* but only the *most recent* inhabitants. (Arizona Indians refer cryptically to the Hohokam—"the people before"—who populated that valley in advance of them.) Some advocates now take nonsense and place it on stilts, referring to "Native Americans" and thus employing (a) the most condescending colonial adjective for *indigènes*, namely "native"; and (b) the one term the description is expressly designed to repudiate, namely "American."

Even if the matter of who came "first" could be decided, it would be pointless except as a means to devalue the claims of those—some millions of Irish, English, German, Italian, Jewish and other refugee workers—who migrated across the Atlantic many years after at least some of the "natives" migrated across the Aleutian Island chain. How can a sensibility that represents mass emigration and immigration as mere conquest and settler colonialism dare to call itself "progressive"? But those who view the history of North America as a narrative of genocide and slavery are, it seems to me, hopelessly stuck on this reactionary position. They can think of the Western expansion of the United States only in terms of plague blankets, bootleg booze and dead buffalo, never in terms of the medicine chest, the wheel and the railway.

One need not be an automatic positivist about this. But it does happen to be the way that history is made, and to complain about it is as empty as complaint about climatic, geological or tectonic shift. Not all changes and victories are "progress." The Roman conquest and subjugation of Britain *was*, I think, a huge advance because it brought the savage English tribes within reach of Mediterranean (including Ptolemaic and Phoenician as well as Greek and Latin) civilization, whereas the Norman Conquest looks like just another random triumph of might.

The very dynasty that funded Columbus put an end to Andalusia in the same year, and thus blew up the cultural bridge between the high attainments of Islamic North Africa and Mesopotamia and the relative backwardness of Castilian Christendom. Still, for that synthesis to have occurred in the first place, creating the marvels of Córdoba and Granada, wars of expansion and conversion and displacement had to be won and lost. Reapportioning Andalusia according to "precedent" would be as futile an idea as restoring Sioux rights that are only "ancestral" as far back as 1814. The Sioux should be able to claim the same rights and titles as any other citizen, and should be compensated for past injury. That goes without saying. But the anti-Columbus movement is bored by concepts of this kind, preferring to flagellate about original sin and therefore, inevitably, to brood about the illusory counterpart to that exploded concept—the Garden of Eden.

Forget it. As Marx wrote about India, the impact of a more developed society upon a culture (or a series of warring cultures, since there was no such nation as India before the British Empire) can spread aspects of modernity and enlightenment that outlive and transcend the conqueror. This isn't always true; the British probably left Africa worse off than they found it, and they certainly retarded the whole life of Ireland. But it is sometimes unambiguously the case that a certain coincidence of ideas, technologies, population movements and politico-military victories leaves humanity on a slightly higher plane than it knew before. The transformation of part of the northern part of this continent into "America" inaugurated a nearly boundless epoch of opportunity and innovation, and thus deserves to be celebrated with great vim and gusto, with or without the participation of those who wish they had never been born.